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INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

SECURITY COUNCIL
Fifty-third year

Identical letters dated 4 November 1998 from the Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and to the President of the Security Council

Referring to document A/53/540-S/1998/999 dated 26 October 1998, I have the honour to enclose an official note dated 4 November 1998 from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic State of Afghanistan and the text appended to it (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 45, and of the Security Council.

(Signed) A. G. Ravan FARHÂDI
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

Annex

Note verbale dated 4 November 1998 from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan addressed to the Secretary-General and to the President of the Security Council

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic State of Afghanistan presents its compliments to His Excellency the Secretary-General of the United Nations and has the honour to present herewith "How the Taliban slaughtered 8,000", an article, dated 1 November 1998, in The Sunday Times (London), by Michael Sheridan (see appendix).

Appendix

THE SUNDAY TIMES · 1 NOVEMBER 1998

How the Taliban slaughtered 8,000

by Michael Sheridan

THE first detailed eyewitness accounts of the massacre of up to 8,000 people by Islamic fundamentalist Taliban fighters who ran amok in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif last August have been passed to western governments.

Testimony compiled by international observers and handed to western diplomats in Pakistan reveals that hundreds of people were packed into containers where they suffocated when the doors were locked in the searing midday heat. Men, women and children were shot in their homes and on the street, and hospital patients were murdered in their beds.

The massacre occurred when, during an offensive aimed at seizing full control of Afghanistan for the first time, Mazar-e-Sharif was overrun by the Taliban, who have imposed the world's most extreme interpretation of Islam, barring women from education, banning television and forcing men to wear beards.

Statements made available to The Sunday Times describe a campaign of slaughter directed against a Shia Muslim minority, the Hazara. The evidence, regarded by experienced aid officials as "highly credible", paints a ghastly picture of butchery and rape as the Taliban shot and cut the throats of Hazaras.

The claims are supported by the influential American group Human Rights Watch, which is due to reveal its own findings on the massacre today and will call on the United Nations to investigate what it describes as "one of the single worst examples of killings of civilians in Afghanistan's 20-year war".

The detailed evidence of Taliban atrocities will embarrass western policymakers who still see the fundamentalists as useful players in a modern "great game" to keep Iranian and Russian influence out of Afghanistan and so ensure that the huge oil and gas riches of central Asia remain a prize for western multinationals.

Ten diplomats from Tehran were among those who died, prompting Iran to mass 200,000 troops on its border with Afghanistan to bolster demands for the killers to be handed over for trial. Troop "manoeuvres" were due to begin yesterday.

Based on eyewitness statements, The Sunday Times has pieced together an account of the nightmare that engulfed Mazar-e-Sharif when the Taliban entered the city from the west on the morning of August 8. They were intent on avenging a massacre of some 2,000 of their own men in 1997, when the Hazaras and other fighters turned against them.

There ensued what one witness called "a frenzy" of vengeance killing. The Taliban fighters swept through the city, firing heavy machineguns mounted on pickup trucks. One man described how the streets were covered with bodies and blood. The Taliban, he said, forbade anyone to bury the corpses for six days.

On the second day, according to numerous witnesses, the Taliban began a house-to-house search for Hazara men. Hazaras, descended from Mongols, are easy to recognise by their distinctive Asiatic features compared with the ethnic Pashtuns who make up the ranks of the Taliban. They share their Shia faith with Iran, while the Taliban are Sunni Muslims.

A witness whose testimony is described as "extremely reliable" by aid officials said most of the victims had been shot in the head, the chest and the testicles. Others had been slaughtered in what he called "the halal way" — by having their throats slit.

One housewife, who has since fled to Pakistan, said the Taliban entered her house and shot her husband and her two brothers dead. Then they cut the men's throats in front of the woman and her children.

Another piece of testimony explained why one Taliban was "very worried he might be excluded from heaven". He had personally shot people in nearly 30 houses, opting to kill them as soon as they opened the door. After killing the men in two homes, he learnt that they were not Hazara but Pashtun. "That he had killed people in 28 Hazara households seemed not to cause him any concern at all," the witness said.

Men not murdered on the spot were "stuffed into containers after being badly beaten", said another witness. He saw the doors opened on a container after all the men inside had died from suffocation.

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He also testified that some containers were filled with children who were taken to an unknown destination after their parents had been killed.

Human Rights Watch has obtained gruesome confirmation of the Taliban's penchant for death by container. It quotes a man who was detained by the militia and saw container trucks filled with victims leaving the Mazar-e-Sharif jail several times every day.

Once he watched as the Taliban opened the container doors to find three prisoners alive and about 300 dead. The Taliban drove the trucks to a desert site known as Dasht-e-Leili and ordered porters to dump the cargo of corpses in the sands.

The Human Rights Watch report and other statements identify three Taliban leaders who appear to be guilty of incitement to kill victims purely because of their ethnic origin. They are:

▶ Mullah Manon Niazi, the new Taliban governor of Mazar-e-Sharif. Numerous witnesses heard him make speeches at mosques and on radio inciting hatred of Hazaras. "Wherever you go we will catch you," he said. "If you go up, we will pull you down by your feet; if you hide below we will pull you up by your hair." One witness testified that Niazi personally selected prisoners to be consigned to the death containers.

▶ Mullah Musa, the so-called director of public health. A witness said Musa toured a public hospital looking for Hazara patients to mark out for death. Later that day, the witness heard from a doctor that Musa had taken a group of gunmen to the army hospital, where they had murdered all 20 or so patients, and relatives who had been visiting them.

▶ Maulawi Mohammed Hanif, a Taliban commander who announced to a crowd of 300 people summoned to a mosque that the policy of the Taliban was to "exterminate" the Hazaras.

International aid workers fear the killings are continuing following the recent fall of the central Afghan town of Bamiyan. They have said thousands of people remain unaccounted for.

Mass mourning: the Tehran funeral of Iranian diplomats killed in Mazar-e-Sharif

No mercy: men, women and children were murdered in their homes as Taliban gunmen took over Mazar-e-Sharif

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